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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000657

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/06/2017

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SUBJECT: CUBAN POLITICAL PRISONERS: NOT A NUMBERS GAME

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Buddy Williams; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (SBU) Summary: The dissident "Cuban Commission on Human Rights," run by Elizardo Sanchez, published a periodic listing of political prisoners July 6, which all international media headlined as "Number of Political Prisoners in Cuba Decreases." The number cited was 246, down from 283 when the report was last issued, roughly a year ago. Elizardo Sanchez's report adds that Cuba still has the highest number of political prisoners per capita in the world, and that human rights conditions in the country are still abysmal. We would add that part of the reduction in numbers is attributable to one former prisoner (Miguel Valdes Tamayo) dying soon after he was released, and another who died in captivity last month. Recently released prisoner Jorge Luis Perez Antunez was evicted from his home this past week. Dissident leader Martha Beatriz Roque has been outspoken regarding Antunez and on the plight of political prisoners in general. We agree with her main point, that the overall reduction in numbers is not a sign of any softening of Castro totalitarian rule. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The report by Elizardo Sanchez says that there are currently 246 political prisoners in Cuba. This number reflects a downward trend from two years ago, when it was at 330, and last year when it was 283. Sanchez's record-keeping on political prisoners is a respected point of reference. The new report indicates that prison conditions are still deplorable and that 246 political prisoners is still higher than any country in the world, measured on a per capita basis. Sanchez also indicates that the overall number of prisoners in Cuba is on a downward trend as well--from roughly 100,000 to 80,000, with a 15-20 percent margin of error.

13. (SBU) Among the individuals accounting for the decrease is Manuel Acosta, a 47-year-old former boxer and member of a dissident group known as Democracy Movement. He was arrested June 21 in the town of Aguada de Pasajeros on vague political charges and found dead three days later, according to letter distributed to international media by a dissident human rights group. Authorities told Acosta's relatives that he hanged himself in his cell, and that an autopsy confirmed suicide. But Acosta's cousin became suspicious after officials refused to turn over Acosta's remains, saying they needed at least 60 days to process them. The cousin said a cleaning lady working at the jail told family members that while in custody, Acosta yelled anti-government slogans and

insults at police, provoking a fight with an officer. During the altercation, the witnesses said, the officer's watch was broken, prompting a group of police to swarm in from their nearby living quarters and beat Acosta. This testimony made its way to independent and international media last week, prompting dissidents to call for a thorough investigation. Independent journalist Guillermo Farinas told us Acosta never had any suicidal tendencies, and believed that he was beaten to death while in captivity.

¶4. (SBU) Jorge Luis Perez Antunez, who was released in April after serving 17 years in prison, found himself evicted from his home during the week ending July 6. He reacted by going on a hunger strike, which was reported in the independent media. Martha Beatriz Roque (MBR) visited Antunez on Sunday, July 8 and prevailed upon authorities in Placetas, Villa Clara Province, to find another place for him to live, which she told us was obtained, even if the structure they found was in deplorable condition. She also said she talked him out of continuing his hunger strike, which she described as "counterproductive." MBR drafted a public letter July 2 to respond to an initiative by National Assembly member and musician Silvio Rodriguez who urged bringing music and culture into prisons. MBR's response, signed by 50 leading dissidents, said that the initiative was ridiculous; what was needed was to improve conditions in prison and release political prisoners, since they didn't belong there in the first place.

¶5. (C) Comment: Elizardo Sanchez, who in 2004 accepted an award from the GOC, is not entirely trusted by the rest of the dissident movement, or by ourselves for that matter. But we repeat: His record-keeping on political prisoners is better than anyone else's, so is accepted as a respected point of reference. What Sanchez, MBR, Oswaldo Paya and other dissidents all agree on is that the reduction in numbers does not reflect any improvement in the overall human

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rights situation in Cuba. This is not a set of statistics or events that leads us to conclude that: (1) Raul Castro's rule is more benign than Fidel Castro's; or (2) Engagement with the regime will get prisoners freed. All of the ones released were at the end of their sentences in any case; and laws are still in place to arrest anyone for peaceful political speech or for "dangerousness," a catch-all category that allows police to take someone off the streets arbitrarily.
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